

More Than a Buzzword: How Donna Kolnes Pivoted for Growth With Adobe

Technology, Privacy, and eCommerce



Silicon Valley has its own undeniably unique culture, immortalized in the media as innovation-driven and fast-paced. Another hallmark of the Silicon Valley culture, of course, is its buzzword-heavy vocabulary. For example, in Silicon Valley speak, a “pivot” is "a structured course correction designed to test a new fundamental hypothesis about the product, strategy, and engine of growth," according to The Lean Startup, the famous book that many technology entrepreneurs consider their Bible.

Adobe, the San Jose, California-based company that’s famous for its multimedia and creativity software, has had numerous pivots since it was founded in 1982. And Donna Kolnes, Adobe’s associate general counsel, has witnessed and embraced these pivots over her 20 year career with Adobe. Along the way, Kolnes has experienced her own pivots alongside her company.



Pivoting for growth at Adobe

“People ask me how I can stay in the same company for over 20 years? They ask, don’t I get bored? Of course not,” Kolnes says. “I have witnessed Adobe transform many times. We are not the same company we were in 1995.” In fact, her experience at Adobe has seemed more like a series of different experiences. “It feels like I have been part of many different startups,” Kolnes explains. “They just all happened to be called Adobe, and Adobe has written my checks for the last 20 years.” While Kolnes has embraced Adobe’s numerous transformations in the past two decades, her own career has also transformed dramatically in that time.

Adobe was founded to develop and sell the PostScript page description language and its first products were digital fonts. Soon after, Adobe developed Adobe Illustrator, a vector-based drawing program, and Adobe Photoshop, a graphics-editing program that would soon become a flagship product for Macintosh. Kolnes joined Adobe right around this time. “And that is how I became a part

of the digital revolution almost right after law school!" she says with a smile. "It was thrilling, exciting, and on the cutting edge. And that is how I learned a lot about OEM software, desktop software, and fonts — especially fonts. They seem like an innocuous little software program but, legally, font IP and ownership issues can be surprisingly complex," Kolnes adds.

A few years before Kolnes joined, Adobe also introduced PDF, the Portable Document Format, and its Adobe Acrobat and Reader software. "Lucky for us the internet exploded right at that time and the stars had aligned. The PDF format allowed people to share documents on the internet and we became a go-to software for various creative professionals, especially those who produced marketing materials and brochures." It was also excellent timing for Kolnes. "I embraced this new product and an entirely different business model. I was on the forefront of a then-revolutionary software product that both individuals and businesses purchased. And at the time I was learning how to draft and negotiate a broad range of inbound, outbound, and collaborative licensing agreements as well as advise on standards participation and risk management of core and shared technologies. It was thrilling, challenging, and exciting — all at the same time," she says. Because Kolnes was alongside Adobe for so many of its vital pivots, these transformations spurred dramatic growth in her own career.

The growth continued past the digital revolution. In October 2011, Adobe first announced the Creative Cloud, Software as a Service (SaaS) offering giving users access to a collection of creative software based on a subscription model as opposed to Adobe's earlier perpetual end user license business for desktop products. The completely different business model transformed Adobe's business in a few very short years. "That is how I moved to the business of software as a service," Kolnes explains. "That is also how I graduated from supporting the boxed software products, to supporting the subscriptions services." Adobe's pivot from boxed software to subscription services led to Kolnes' pivot into a new type of in-house practice. According to Kolnes, after the change Adobe faced a variety of new legal issues. "Constant changes were a part of my daily existence," she acknowledges. And this constant change has continued throughout Kolnes' time at Adobe. "We are the opposite of stodgy. We are constantly on the cutting edge of technology, business, and legal issues," she exclaims with pride. "For the last 20 years I have been learning on steroids!"

Pivoting personal with the professional

Kolnes' career pivots have also taken place alongside her important personal pivots. As an attorney and a mother of twins, Kolnes has had to perform a balancing act. Just as Adobe helped her grow in her career, it also helped her grow in her personal life. Another question people ask Kolnes is how she has managed to progress in her career while raising twins. Kolnes explains that soon after she returned to Adobe from her maternity leave, she had an incident with her children's nanny. "I realized that I didn't want a full-time nanny taking care of my children. But I also realized that I didn't want to stay home full time," she says. This is a dilemma many professional women face, and Kolnes chose a solution that worked for her. "I decided to work part-time, which I did for 12 years," she explains. For Kolnes, working three days every week allowed her to be both an amazing mother and an excellent attorney. As her children grew up she worked more hours, until she eventually returned to full-time work when they were teenagers.

"Adobe was very flexible and I felt blessed to be able to balance work with motherhood," Kolnes says. Kolnes also deserves credit for managing her part-time work so well that hardly anyone could tell she wasn't working full time. "None of my internal Adobe clients knew that I was working part-time. Clients could always get ahold of me if needed," she reveals. This flexibility from Adobe encouraged her to work harder and be a better attorney. "Because I felt so fortunate, I worked very

hard every day to make the most of my working time," Kolnes says. "I valued the opportunity to learn, practice law, and be on the cutting edge of technology, business, and law — while still raising my children on my own terms."

By securing the accommodations she needed to handle this personal pivot on her own terms, Kolnes could influence positive pivots in her career life. In fact, during her part-time tenure, Kolnes received a few promotions, many challenging assignments, and an increasing level of responsibility at Adobe. "I made sure that it was a seamless transition," she explains. "I felt fortunate to be here and lucky to work part time."

Kolnes' journey is a prime example of how leaning into pivots, in both personal and career life, can lead to much-needed growth and opportunities. "The best part was that while being flexible, Adobe still gave me opportunities to showcase my ability to change and adapt, even when I was part-time," she explains. "That is how I could learn, grow, and develop for 21 years. Adobe is a company that changed many times and allowed me to change, grow and learn with it." Kolnes shows that "pivot" isn't just a Silicon Valley buzzword — it's a dynamic way to have a more satisfying, tailor-made career full of growth.

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